Detailed Descriptive Coding: An Example Based on the Study of Political Graffiti

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Student Guide

Introduction

This Case presents the technique of detailed descriptive coding of visual data as a method for qualitative research. The data used to illustrate the method were taken by the author in central Rome and Buenos Aires. They comprise ten photographs of political graffiti in each of the two cities. They are presented at the end of the Case. The substantive research based upon the technique will be published in the specialist journal, *Visual Studies*, in late 2018 (Penn, forthcoming). The method was designed to recalibrate the sociological analysis of graffiti away from moral judgments towards an appreciation and understanding of its wider cultural significance.

Detailed Descriptive Coding

Coding is a central part of empirical sociological research, whether it is primarily qualitative or quantitative in nature. It provides the building blocks for sociological generalizations and explanations. As with all empirical research in the social sciences, this method is closely entwined with wider conceptual and theoretical issues. The method outlined is systematic, iterative, and time-consuming but nonetheless provided a solid basis for the wider interpretation of the cultural significance of urban political graffiti.

The Dataset

The data comprise 20 photographs of political graffiti taken by the author in Rome and Buenos Aires. The research emerged from an earlier interest in graffiti in Italian and British football (see Penn, 2004, 2005). The research focused specifically on political graffiti, and the twenty images were selected as examples of such graffiti which is widespread in both cities. It formed part of a wider set of projects undertaken at Lancaster University as part of the ESRC's Research Methods Initiative (see Penn, 2011).

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New Methods in Visual Sociology – Using Web-based Material and CAQDAS for Social Research. National Centre for Research Methods Workshop on *Visualisation and Visual Sociology – Beyond the Quantitative-Qualitative Divide*, September 2011, Lancaster University, UK.

Analysis: Detailed Descriptive Coding

The present Case Study explores the use of detailed descriptive coding of photographs of political graffiti taken in Rome and Buenos Aires. This method was developed as a necessary precursor to a detailed, concrete, empirically informed interpretation of the wider meanings embodied in such materials. It can also be seen as an antidote to the dismissive approach to urban graffiti evident in research such as that of Sampson and Raudenbasch (1999, 2004), and of Sampson (2012) who argued that urban graffiti was a major sign of "disorder."

Their research involved assessing neighbourhoods in Chicago by videoing streets from an unmarked vehicle. Apart from the rather sinister aspect of this method of cataloguing graffiti, such an approach totally ignored its content. From their perspective, graffiti was the equivalent of rubbish on the streets and was framed within a wider "broken windows" paradigm. At a seminar in the Sociology Department at UCLA that I attended in 2007, Sampson presented these ideas and was challenged by Harold Garfinkel, the founder of ethnomethodology, for his approach. Garfinkel argued – to my mind convincingly – that graffiti was part of the very "ordering of the street." In particular, in South Central Los Angeles where the Rodney King riots had erupted in 1992, graffiti was used routinely to demarcate the territorial boundaries of different local gangs, most notably between the Crips (blue) and the Bloods (red). For young men, in particular, the ability to read and understand these graffiti signs was crucial to their personal safety and survival.

Garfinkel and I subsequently spoke about the graffiti that I had examined in my earlier research into football in Britain and Italy (see Penn, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008), and he encouraged me to undertake detailed empirical research into its phenomenal forms (see Garfinkel, 2007). His advice to me was to avoid any "rush to abstraction" and to examine graffiti in its rich content and phenomenological details. This lead me to conduct the research outlined in this case study which involved photographing political graffiti in central Rome and Buenos Aires and to analyse the photographic images collected through a process of detailed descriptive coding. The central purpose of this Case Study is to provide an explanation of how this was undertaken.

Stage 1: Taking the Photographs

The first stage of the research involved taking the photographs of graffiti in central Rome and Buenos Aires. Both have a large amount of graffiti present on buildings throughout the central city. Each photograph was taken by myself and involved

framing the image to contain as much information as possible. As will become apparent, many of the images were complex in terms of content. A record was made of the precise location of each photograph and the date it was taken. These are important pieces of information as urban graffiti is often transitory.

Stage 2: Selecting the Photographs

Ten photographs were selected for analysis in both cities from wider sets of images. Selection was based upon three main principles. The first was the clarity of the photograph itself. The second was their explicit political content. Not all graffiti in the two cities were political in content. Some involved individual “tags” which acted as visual signatures of the writers themselves. The third principle involved the level of complexity within the photograph. As will become apparent, political graffiti can take the form of “conversations” where one political message is superimposed on another, different message. The photographs were selected to be illustrative of political graffiti in Rome and Buenos Aires. The analysis and subsequent published article (Penn, forthcoming) made no claim to typicality in some sort of statistical sense. Indeed, that formulation would have completely missed the central point of the research methodology adopted.

Stage 3: Coding the Photographs

Coding is a central aspect of all social science. It is intrinsic to both quantitative and qualitative styles of research (see Bryman, 2015). The detailed descriptive coding presented in this Case is a form of intensive qualitative analysis. As Saldana (2013) put it in his textbook on coding, “a code is a researcher-generated construct” and takes several iterations. Unfortunately, his textbook has very little to say on how this might apply to visual data. Bazeley (2013), in another major textbook on qualitative data analysis, also emphasised the fluid and iterative nature of coding, but once again provided few clues as to how this might apply to visual data.

The detailed descriptive coding of the photographs undertaken was a complex and time-consuming process. In many ways, it was a voyage of discovery as there were few signposts on how to execute this approach in practice. The method used in this research examined the photographs in their fine details. The coding scheme used evolved during the course of the analysis itself in an iterative and dialectical fashion. The coding process involved the author and a fellow researcher examining each photograph together in great detail. This was time-consuming, but having two coders enhanced the process greatly, as each coder was able to see different elements that required coding.

In the first instance, a set of organising "themes" were identified (see Table 1). These were subdivided into "categories." For example, the style of the text in the graffiti was categorized within a theme labelled "imagery/language." Within this, a series of specific codes were identified including "lettering," "numbering," and "crossing out." Overall, four themes were identified and, within these, 22 categories and 62 specific codes were generated. An example was the category "type of symbol" used in the graffiti; within this, were eight specific symbols – "Red Star," "Celtic Cross," "Circle A (?)," "Hammer and Sickle," "Swastika," "Trident," "Interlocking Venuses," and "Other."

Table 1: The Structure of the Detailed Coding Scheme.

Theme	Category	Code
Overall context	Area in Buenos Aires	BUENOS AIRES: Avenida De Mayo
		BUENOS AIRES: Plaza Congreso
	Area in Rome	ROME: Prati

		ROME: Monti
		ROME: Via Cavour
		ROME: Esquilino
		ROME: Piazza Augusto Imperatore
	Type of location	Area: Consumption
		Area: Mixed
		Area: Residential
		Area: Park
Surface/ background	Background colour	Background colour: Grey
		Background colour: Ivory
		Background colour: Burnished bronze
		Background colour: Light yellow
		Background colour: Salmon pink
		Background colour:

		White
	Surface material	Surface material: Stone/ concrete
		Surface material: Stucco
		Surface material: Metal
		Surface material: Brick
		Surface material: Travertine
	Type of surface	Surface: Wall
		Surface: Portico
		Surface: Column
		Surface: Sign
		Surface: Fountain
		Surface: Sidewalk
		Surface: Telephone box
Imagery/ language	Clarity of graffiti	Clarity: Partially decipherable
		Clarity: Indecipherable

		Clarity: Decipherable
	Colour of text	Writing: Red
		Writing: Black
		Writing: Sky Blue
		Writing: Blue
		Writing: Brown
		Writing: White
		Writing: Yellow
	Conversation	Conversation
	Presence of more than one piece of graffiti in the frame	Plural imagery
	Graffiti overlaid/underlaid	Underlaid
		Overlaid
	Identifies pieces of graffiti only partially captured in the photograph	Partial
	Language of writing	Language: Spanish
		Language: Italian
		Language: English

		Language: NA
		Language: German
		Language: Latin
		Language: Multiple
		Form: Stencil
	Mode of application	Mode: Spray can
		Mode: Pen
	Political affiliation of text	PA: Left wing
		PA: Right wing
		PA: Anarchist
	Style of text	Style: Lettering
		Style: Multiple
		Style: Symbol
		Style: Picture
		Style: Crossing out
		Style: Numbering
	Subject of text	Subject: Political
		Subject: Football

		Subject: Tag
		Subject: Multiple
		Subject: Not known
		Subject: Romance
	Type of symbol	Symbol: Red star
		Symbol: Celtic cross
		Symbol: Circle A
		Symbol: Hammer and sickle
		Symbol: Other
		Symbol: Swastika
		Symbol: Trident
		Symbol: Interlocking venuses
	Writing case	Writing case: Capitals
		Writing case: Non-capitals
Relatedness	Nature of adjacent/relevant images	Image adjacent: Plaque
		Image adjacent: Poster

Stage 4: Interpreting the Detailed Descriptive Codes

The central hermeneutic purpose of the descriptive process outlined above was the identification of the detailed content of each photograph. However, this was done to facilitate a sociological analysis of such urban political graffiti. Photograph 1 from Rome provides an illustration of relatively simple imagery. It comprised a left-wing political message written in red capitals using a spray can with the hammer and sickle symbol immediately to the right of the written message "**RED ƵONE**." This message is written in English but with an Italian-style **Ƶ.** This suggested the active presence of left-wing graffiti writers and a desire to communicate with a broad audience, not simply of locals but of international visitors (the graffiti was within 400 yards of the Colosseum). The Hammer and Sickle is written in exactly the same style as the writing on the wall and represents the classic symbol of the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

Political symbols are generally more esoteric than the classic hammer and sickle. In three of the photographs taken in Rome, the Celtic Cross was in evidence. In photograph 2, it was written using black spray paint with a crossing out superimposed in red. This form is reversed in photograph 9. Here, the Celtic Cross (once again in black) is superimposed on a left-wing message written in red. It is also present in Photograph 6 beneath the **Gruppo Prati** message and adjacent to other graffiti all written using sky blue paint. This colour represents the shirt worn by SS Lazio, one of the two rival Serie A football teams in Rome. The remaining graffiti messages within this photograph are all designed to insult their rivals AS Roma ["**ROMANISTA EBREO" [with swastika], "LA SQUADRA NEGRI," "ROMA MERDA," "AVE PAOLO," "PAOLO DI CANIO"]. "PAOLO DI CANIO"** refers to the famous striker for SS Lazio. He achieved notoriety when he gave a "Saluto Romano" [a Fascist salute] to the AS Roma fans in the Stadio Olimpico at the end of the Lazio-Roma derby in 2005 (see Testa & Armstrong, 2012). He is also well known for a tattoo on his arm with the words DUCE written

on it. This refers to his admiration for Mussolini who used the sobriquet “Duce” to describe himself.

To interpret the significance of this cluster of messages, it is necessary to understand the wider subcultures of football fandom and extreme politics in the city (see Dal Lago, 1990; Doidge, 2015). These messages in Italian are aimed primarily at a local audience and are well understood by many Italians living and working in Rome. From a sociological point of view, these messages require the adoption of a degree of inter-textuality (Kristeva, 1982). In other words, the meaning of theses graffiti is inferred from other texts. In order to grasp what these detailed phenomenal forms of graffiti signified, it was necessary to apply knowledge acquired elsewhere. Most local Romans and visitors to Rome understand the connotations of the swastika and the hammer and sickle. Far fewer, particularly visitors to Italy, would realise that the Celtic Cross – a symbol widely available as jewellery in English cathedral gift shops – is also associated with classic Fascism and, more recently, with various neo-Fascist groups in Italy and, indeed, further afield (see Bull, 2007).

Clearly, there are strong politically informed messages on the walls of central Rome and Buenos Aires. These are rendered invisible by an external *a priori* sociological approach that deems them all to be signs of “disorder” and, therefore, intrinsically uninteresting in their detailed phenomenological form.

Stage 5: The Comparison of Rome and Buenos Aires

Central to the detailed descriptive coding utilised in the research was a comparative approach. This is a commonly used method in sociology as it facilitates the generation of new explanations of how the social world is organized. Unlike the natural sciences, social scientists rarely conduct classic controlled experiments to test for the impact of one factor on a specific outcome. Rather, they probe the world as it is naturally constituted and structured and ascertain the

impact of a variety of social factors upon specific outcomes in the social world.

The comparative method can either involve comparisons within countries (which was the case in the Social Change and Economic Life Research Initiative: Penn, 1994 in Britain) or comparisons across countries, as exemplified by Penn and Lambert (2009). As Hantrais and Mangen (1996, p. 1) put it:

> For the study to be cross-national and comparative, individuals or teams should set out to study particular issues or phenomena in two or more countries with the express intention of comparing their manifestations in different socio-cultural settings, using the same research instruments.

Such an approach allows the grounding of observations and concepts about social patterns within natural settings. It also permits and facilitates theoretical innovation and generalizations. Indeed, comparative methods are central to the development of what Glaser and Strauss (1967) termed “grounded theory.”

The detailed coding of the colour of the graffiti in the two cities proved significant. Messages were strongly colour-coded in Rome. Black was used for messages from the far right and red for those from the far left. Messages from football ultras were generally coded in the colour of their respective team’s shirts – sky blue for SS Lazio and maroon and orange for AS Roma. Political messages were also colour-coded in Buenos Aires but in a different way to Rome. Black is also the traditional colour of anarchism and was used in Photos 12 and 19. Red, the traditional colour used by Communists, was also evident (see Photos 15 and 16). However, red combined with black is a colour combination associated traditionally with anarcho-syndicalism and – more recently – with Guevarism (see Photos 18 and 19). Clearly, the colour coding of political messages is context-specific. The use of black in graffiti in Rome connotes something very different in Buenos Aires.

The successful interpretation of the content of these political messages requires

considerable knowledge of the specific political context and the history of each country. Photograph 2 illustrates this clearly. The message "**PAVOLINI EROE!" ["PAVOLINI THE HERO!"]** also has a Celtic Cross symbol immediately to the right. This has been crossed out but not obliterated in red, and a Hammer and Sickle (also in red) has been placed to the right of this. "**PAVOLINI EROE!"** has also been crossed out but remains clearly legible. The message refers to Alessandro Pavolini, a prominent Fascist leader in Italy during the 1920s and 1930s. He was appointed Minister of Popular Culture by Mussolini in 1939. After Mussolini's fall in 1943, Pavolini was a prime mover in the creation of the Brigati Neri [Black Brigades] (Gagliani, 1999) who became notorious under the Salò Republic for their brutal tactics used against the Communist-led Partisans in the last months of World War II. Pavolini himself was executed by partisans in 1945 and subsequently hanged upside down in the Piazza Loreto in Milan alongside Mussolini. The message indicated that these events were far from forgotten by neo-Fascist groups in contemporary Rome and were designed to both anger and provoke their far left opponents (see Roversi, 2006).

How was this interpretation generated? At the time the photograph was taken, the author was unaware of Pavolini or his biography. These were uncovered through a range of interconnected, triangulated methods. Historical and contemporary research was combined with discussions with prominent Italian sociologists (Professors Everardo Minardi of the University of Bologna, Alessandro Baroncelli at Cattolica Università, Milan and Egidio Riva at Bicocca University in Milan) as well as with journalists and people living in central Rome itself.

Several photographs illustrate the "conversational" form of political debates on the walls in Rome (see Photograph 2 "Pavolini Eroe" and Photograph 9 "No War No Wall"). In each case, the original message has been opposed by a counter message superimposed on the earlier graffiti. However, both remain clearly legible. There has been no attempt to obliterate the original message;

rather, the writers of the second (“response”) message clearly want their audience to see both elements. This can be seen as a modern equivalent to the messages that have traditionally festooned the “talking statues” in Rome such as the one located within the Piazza di Pasquino in the centre of the city. These have featured in Roman urban street discourse since the 15th century and incorporate messages and counter messages pasted on the walls of prominent squares in the central city since that time. They also parallel the “conversations” analysed by Lennon (2014) in his research on graffiti produced in Cairo during the Arab Spring in 2011.

The need to understand the local context was also evident in the photographs taken in Buenos Aires. Many of them contained images of stencilled graffiti, which is a prominent feature of South American graffiti (see Manco, 2002; Moraes & Rivas, 2008; Ruiz, 2008).They are evident in Photographs 11–14. The latter shows a black stencilled image of a head with the message “**DONDE ESTA?”** (“**WHERE IS HE?”**) below. This represents the head of Julio Lopez. Lopez was a key witness at the trial of Miguel Etchecolatz, a prominent member of the Argentinian junta involved during the “Dirty War” [“Guerra Sucia”] after 1976 that led to thousands of people disappearing and being subsequently murdered at the hands of the regime (Lewis, 2001; Taylor, 1997). Lopez himself disappeared in 2006 just before he was due to give evidence in court against Etchecolatz. As yet, there is no news of his whereabouts, but many Argentinians believe that he was murdered in retribution for his testimony. A smaller stencil of his head in red also features in Photograph 15. The head of Julio Lopez represents a popular motif in central Buenos Aires and is immediately recognizable to the local inhabitants.

Summary

This Case Study illustrates and explains the detailed descriptive coding of two sets of photographs. These were examined in great detail in order to uncover their

phenomenal forms. The process of coding itself was time-consuming, laborious, and iterative. The coding template reproduced in Table 1 outlines this process and should be seen as an exemplar of how to conduct such research. It cannot – given its context-specificity – provide a general formula of how to execute such an analysis in a different situation. Nonetheless, the template is intrinsically linked to the photographs themselves and can be evaluated empirically by other social scientists.

It is important to recognise that detailed coding is a method of analysis designed to facilitate a better interpretation of visual phenomena. Generalisations are inductive, empirically grounded, complex, and context-specific. However, the coding process also involves interpretation and intertextuality. Clearly, at one level, all twenty images depict graffiti. However, this would crucially miss their central meanings. These are located in the details of the images themselves.

Reflective Questions

Please include 3–4 questions that allow students to reflect on issues brought up in the exemplar. Using the additional photographs supplied at the end of the Case, what sort of detailed descriptive codes could be generated?

1. When analysing these extra photographic images, what additional contextual information would be necessary for their understanding?
2. How could you generate a set of images yourself for an analysis?
3. When creating photographic images, what sort of other sociological and ethical issues might impact upon the research process?

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